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Consideration of reports on the work of the Standing Committee

Report of the sixty-fourth meeting of the Standing Committee (21-22 September 2015)

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I. Introduction

1. The Vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee, His Excellency Ambassador Carsten Staur (Denmark), chaired the meeting on 21 September 2015. The second Vice-Chairperson, Her Excellency Ambassador Rosemary McCarney (Canada), chaired the meeting on 22 September 2015.

2. During the opening of the meeting, the Vice-Chairperson noted that Her Excellency Ambassador Rosemary McCarney (Canada) had been elected second Vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee by silent procedure, following the communication from the Chairperson sharing her nominations by Egypt and Peru. He welcomed her to the Committee.

3. The Deputy High Commissioner, addressing the Committee for the first time since assuming her position in July 2015, made introductory remarks, outlining her views of the context in which UNHCR was operating. She spoke about the current situation unfolding in Europe, involving large numbers of refugees who were so desperate that they deemed it a better option to risk their lives and those of their children on perilous journeys, than to withstand the deteriorating living conditions in neighbouring host countries as a result of shortfalls in international assistance. Due to this and other simultaneous crises, UNHCR was experiencing the largest funding gap in its history. While struggling to meet the needs stemming from these emergencies, the Office remained committed to resolving protracted situations of displacement. Regarding UNHCR's 2014 financial statements[1] and the biennial programme budget for 2016-2017,[2] the Deputy High Commissioner noted that the reports of the United Nations Board of Auditors and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) were positive about the efforts made by UNHCR to strengthen budget formulation, implementation and programme results.

II. Adoption of the agenda

4. The agenda for the meeting (EC/66/SC/CRP.21) was adopted.

III. Management, financial control, administrative oversight and human resources

A. Finance and oversight

(i) Report of the Board of Auditors

5. The Controller and Director of the Division of Financial and Administrative Management (DFAM) introduced the financial statements for the year 2014, as well as the key issues and measures taken in response to the report of the Board of Auditors for 2014.

6. The unqualified audit opinion of the Board of Auditors was welcomed by several delegations, as was the progress made by UNHCR in addressing the Board's recommendations from previous years. The Office was urged to establish clear timelines for the implementation of 2014 recommendations. While noting the Board's assessment that UNHCR had a strong overall financial position in 2014, delegations expressed concern

[1] See A/AC.96/1146 and A/70/5/Add.6.
[2] See A/AC.96/1147 and A/AC.96/1147/Add.1.

at the growing funding gap and the impact on certain operations and programmes, particularly in Africa and the Americas. UNHCR was encouraged to work to ensure predictability of funding, and several delegations urged donor countries to provide flexible, robust and predictable contributions and to limit tight earmarking.

7. Delegations commended the organization's efforts to implement the Board's recommendations on internal control and fraud prevention, as well as the initiation of the fraud prevention project. One delegation noted that clear timelines for implementation were needed. Measures to make UNHCR's contributions to administrative and headquarters costs of implementing partners more transparent were appreciated. In relation to UNHCR's new "People strategy," the Office was encouraged to ensure senior management involvement in human resources matters, to continue to clarify and re-categorize staff costs, and to ensure that staff trainings were effective in practice. Several delegations welcomed the Board's recommendations with respect to improving cost-effectiveness in education programmes, as well as the proposed development of a guidance framework to analyse cost-effectiveness across the organization. Further information was requested on the working group that will be established to review existing processes and guidance for the analysis of cost-effectiveness.

8. In response to a question about progress in establishing the global biometric registration system, the Deputy High Commissioner noted that this was on track to be completed in 2016. She also reassured delegations that despite the growing number of emergencies, UNHCR sought to ensure sufficient resources were devoted to vital solutions efforts, such as the pilot programme for the voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees from Kenya. The Controller added that it was important to reach out to non-traditional donors to fill funding gaps. The Controller stated that UNHCR constantly sought to improve existing systems to monitor cost-effectiveness, including through the upgrade of UNHCR's enterprise resource planning system, MSRP. With respect to the fraud prevention project, an ambitious but achievable timeline had been established for delivery in 2016, and cooperation was envisaged with other entities in the United Nations system to develop a harmonized fraud strategy. In response to one query regarding the new roster of investigation specialists, administered by one of UNHCR's non-governmental organization partners, the Controller noted that this would assist implementing partners in addressing fraud in their own operations and would not supersede UNHCR's existing audit and oversight structures. The Controller also clarified that a notation of "partial implementation" for prior year recommendations meant that UNHCR was still working to fulfil the recommendation.

(ii) Internal Audit

9. The Chief of the UNHCR Audit Service of the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) presented the report on internal audit activities in UNHCR (A/AC.96/1148). He noted that 24 audits had been undertaken during the reporting period, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 69/253. In consultation with UNHCR's Independent Audit and Oversight Committee (IAOC) and Internal Compliance and Accountability Committee (ICAC), the OIOS had monitored the implementation of its recommendations, especially those that were critical and those that had been outstanding for more than two years. The OIOS issued 16 critical recommendations in 2014 and 2015, with UNHCR fully implementing the majority during the reporting period.

10. Delegations welcomed the report, as well as UNHCR's revised memorandum of understanding with the OIOS. They expressed their appreciation for UNHCR's performance, which was deemed satisfactory or partially satisfactory in the majority of audits. One delegation underscored the importance of strengthened coordination between

the OIOS and other oversight bodies. In larger operations, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa and Africa regions, the importance of greater scrutiny was underscored. UNHCR was also encouraged to address outstanding recommendations, as some were more than two years overdue. One delegation welcomed the strengthening of the audit function through the creation of a new auditor post.

11. The Chief of the Audit Service noted that the OIOS worked with the Board of Auditors and other oversight bodies to avoid auditing the same locations or activities in a given year, or alternatively coordinated to conduct joint inspections, particularly in high-risk areas. Efforts were also ongoing to improve coordination between oversight bodies, including through use of the enterprise risk management system. He added that coordination between the OIOS and senior management was positive, and that an agreement had always been reached on recommendations issued.

(iii) Independent Audit and Oversight Committee

12. Before consideration of the Report of the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee for 2014-2015 (EC/66/SC/CRP.26), the Deputy High Commissioner noted that UNHCR was dedicated to good governance, quality oversight, an effective audit function and the establishment of a robust risk management system. The Office welcomed the expert advice that the IAOC provided to senior management in the fulfilment of its oversight responsibilities.

13. The outgoing Chairperson of the IAOC for 2014-2015 then presented the IAOC's third annual report, highlighting major areas reviewed from July 2014 to June 2015. These included: oversight in UNHCR; internal audit carried out by the OIOS; inspections and investigation undertaken by the Inspector General's Office; external audit conducted by the Board of Auditors; evaluation carried out by the Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES); enterprise risk management; accountability and internal control; and financial statements and reporting under the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS). She commended UNHCR for progress achieved on fraud prevention, enterprise risk management, implementing partnership management, and personal accountability. She reiterated the need to implement critical and ageing audit recommendations and to address high-risk areas, especially in light of the transition of key members of senior management in a relatively short period of time, as well as to pay further attention to possible fraud by third parties. She noted that the IAOC had consulted the OIOS on the possibility of changing or refining the ratings of the system of audits.

14. Member States expressed appreciation to the IAOC for addressing a wide array of issues relating to audit and oversight, and welcomed the focus on high-risk areas. In view of UNHCR's growing budget, delegations commended efforts to strengthen audit and oversight and strongly encouraged the Office to implement related recommendations, while maintaining some degree of flexibility in operations and with partners. Delegations requested that the roles and responsibilities of different audit functions be clarified and expressed support for the IAOC's view on the role of evaluation, which should be distinct from internal audit. Several delegations also asked about the role of PDES and the relationship between policy development and evaluation, and sought clarification on the ways in which the evaluation function would be strengthened within UNHCR. The Office was encouraged to report on its overall resource requirements for its evaluation function, including in emergency situations, and to ensure an adequate investigation function. Several delegations expressed support for the observations made by the IAOC on the need to advertise the position of Inspector General externally. Member States also urged UNHCR to include the Controller in senior management discussions, as well as to consider mitigation measures in view of the expected decline in revenue in coming years.

15. In response to a question on the need to ensure oversight of implementing partners while not impeding operational functionality, the outgoing Chairperson of the IAOC noted that this balance could be achieved by streamlining existing policies rather than introducing

new ones. Regarding evaluation, the Chairperson underscored the importance of building on existing momentum to strengthen the evaluation function within the Office, including through implementation of the forthcoming revised evaluation policy, rather than seeking to strengthen the independence of PDES per se. Responding to queries on the way in which UNHCR recognizes revenue, the Chairperson of the IAOC for 2015-2016 noted that, while IPSAS recommends recognizing all money received in a particular year as revenue regardless of whether that money would be spent in subsequent years, many other accounting standards only recognize such funds as "deferred revenue", meaning that they would be clearly listed as unavailable in the year that they were received. In the view of the IAOC, the IPSAS practice could create volatility and it was preferable to ensure as much clarity on the actual financial situation in a given year as possible. She further noted that the IAOC commended UNHCR for its efforts to ensure better processes with respect to the choice, monitoring and auditing of implementing partners. In response to a question from one delegation about measures taken by UNHCR to protect the data of persons of concern, particularly biometric data, the Chairperson of the IAOC for 2015-2016 noted that data protection would be on the agenda of the Committee in the next year.

B. Management

16. The Officer-in-charge of the Organizational Development and Management Service (ODMS) presented the update on UNHCR structural and management reform (EC/66/SC/CRP.22), outlining the impact of the reform measures undertaken since 2012. She was accompanied by the Deputy Director of the Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). The Deputy High Commissioner also commented on the reform processes, noting the three-fold increase in the amount of resources allocated to programme delivery in the field and the significant reduction in staff costs that had been achieved. She further noted the expansion of partnerships, which had brought UNHCR greater operational flexibility and technical expertise in delivering its mandate.

17. Several delegations referred to the reform efforts as a "good news story," and encouraged UNHCR to keep the Standing Committee informed about ongoing activities in this area. Regionalization efforts were commended, as were measures to enhance results-based management, including the redesign of Global Focus. UNHCR's efforts with respect to human resources management, including the revised policy on performance management and the establishment of an entry-level humanitarian professional programme, were also welcomed. The policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities, as well as the strengthening and reconfiguration of Emergency Services, were recognized as timely. With respect to implementing partner management, one delegation suggested that the Office look not just at the proportion of money channelled through them, but also on the impact of their activities on persons of concern. Delegations also expressed an interest in UNHCR's efforts to enhance internal communication and in the restructuring of the Division of Human Resources Management (DHRM).

18. In response to a query on whether UNHCR would be in a position to continue to reduce the proportion of funds spent on headquarters costs, the Deputy High Commissioner noted that it was important to maintain adequate oversight and other functions and cautioned against headquarters services becoming too "thin". With respect to interest expressed in the policy on enterprise risk management and the results of the recent organization-wide risk assessment, she undertook to provide a briefing to Member States. She also indicated that she would revert with UNHCR's views on the recommendations by some oversight bodies that PDES be split into two separate functions. In response to a question on staffing and structural adjustments made to operations as a result of the 2012 stocktaking on regionalization, the Officer-in-charge of ODMS stated that post adjustments had been made to ensure that the structure of operations corresponded to their needs. The Deputy Director of DPSM noted that that there had been significant progress with respect to implementation of results-based management, but that a working group had been

established to monitor this and ensure maximum impact. In response to questions regarding progress in implementing the global strategic priorities (GSPs), the Deputy Director drew attention to the "Update on the global strategic priorities" (EC/66/SC/CRP.18) which had been presented to the Standing Committee in June 2015, and welcomed further input from Member States in this regard. He took note that reporting on financial information with respect to implementing partners could be better linked to programmatic impact.

C. Human resources

(i) Human resources, including staff welfare

19. The Director of DHRM presented the update on human resources, including staff welfare (EC/66/SC/CRP.23), providing an overview of reforms and progress achieved in 2014 and 2015, including the launch of the "People strategy" for 2016-2021. The new strategy sought to revisit and strengthen the way in which UNHCR recruits, supports and develops its workforce. The Director of DHRM described the ways in which the Office would respond to human resources through addressing four key goals: preparedness and diversity; performance and competence; flexibility and timeliness; and care and support.

20. Delegations welcomed the new strategy, commending UNHCR's efforts to adopt a people-centred approach and to shift from an approach of human resources administration to one of human resources management for all staff and affiliate workforce. Delegations encouraged UNHCR to improve gender balance and commended positive developments, such as the review of the gender equity policy. Member States also requested regular updates on the implementation of the "People strategy," including with respect to diversity, its impact on affiliate workforce, the review of the gender equity policy, and security for female personnel. A breakdown of international professional staff by region was requested in order to better appreciate efforts to improve geographical diversity.

21. UNHCR was encouraged to strengthen efforts to recruit and train women, and to hire personnel from under-represented regions, including those who only speak one United Nations language. Further information was requested on the impact of recent external recruitment programmes. Delegations underscored the importance of high standards in the areas of staff health, welfare and psychosocial support.

22. In response to interest in the future implementation of the "People strategy," the Director of DHRM offered to keep Member States appraised through regular updates. Responding to queries on the gender policy, which was still under review, the Director offered to brief Member States on the preliminary findings of the review and the way forward, once available. She outlined the work of the Strategic and Transformative Human Resources Service, which focused on workforce planning, leadership and succession planning in order to address both current needs and institution building in the longer-term. She also noted that the Workforce Analysis and Business Intelligence Unit, established in 2014, was in the first stages of developing a methodology to analyse skills gaps and trends in order to improve workforce planning, including through acquisition of new software. Regarding psychosocial support and outreach, the Director of DHRM noted efforts had been made to provide psychosocial support through various avenues, including new technologies for staff in remote areas to maintain contact with their families. Ten UNHCR staff welfare counsellors also frequently travelled to the field to help establish individual contact and support staff when they encountered problems.

(ii) Staff security

23. Following the presentation of the Director of DHRM, the Director of the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS) presented the update on staff security (EC/66/SC/CRP.24), noting that UNHCR personnel were working in increasingly challenging operational environments and subject to security threats, including attacks. She remarked on the need to strengthen the culture of security within UNHCR and to adopt appropriate measures to enable personnel to "stay and deliver" for persons of concern to the Office.

24. Delegations commended the dedication and courage of UNHCR personnel, particularly national staff. They also expressed their condolences to the families of staff who had lost their lives or were injured while assisting and protecting forcibly displaced populations. In view of the complex security environment in many operations, including increased targeted attacks against humanitarian personnel, Member States urged UNHCR to continue to work closely with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and other partners. Efforts to deploy field security staff, the "Safe road use" campaign, and specialized training, notably for female personnel, were welcomed as positive developments.

25. The Director of DESS thanked delegations for their support for staff, and noted that Emergency Services staff had been fully deployed to various emergency situations. She also noted the importance of linking contingency planning with security preparedness. The Head of the Field Security Service added that UNHCR fully participated in inter-agency efforts with respect to security, including through the pooling of resources, and that cooperation was integrated at all levels, including contingency planning and early warning systems. Statistics on security incidents were regularly reviewed by UNHCR to identify trends, and analysis was then shared with UNDSS for wider use within the United Nations system.

IV. Programme budgets and funding

26. The Deputy High Commissioner introduced the agenda item, once again drawing attention to the fact that UNHCR was facing the largest funding gap in its history as a result of increasing needs, including 10 emergencies. Despite the sustained commitment from donors, the projected funding for 2015 continued to fall far below the comprehensive needs. She noted that the High Commissioner had implemented a number of cost-saving measures to address the serious financial situation and to provide flexibility to respond to the most pressing needs. Despite the efforts to minimize the impact on persons of concern, many operations were being seriously affected by the funding shortfalls. UNHCR counted on the continued support of the Committee in helping to put the organization on firmer financial ground in the difficult period ahead.

27. The Deputy High Commissioner also noted that the Office was finalizing a paper on a proposed revision to the overhead programme support cost policy,[7] which would then be circulated to Executive Committee members, with a view to discussion in informal consultations.

[7] See report on the sixty-third meeting of the Standing Committee, A/AC.96/1151, para. 50.

A. Update on budgets and funding for 2015

28. The Controller and Director of DFAM and the Director of the Division of External Relations (DER) jointly presented the update on budgets and funding for 2015 (EC/66/SC/CRP.25).

29. The Controller provided an update on the 2015 budget approved by the Executive Committee in October 2014, noting that nine supplementary budgets had since been established in 2015. Recent appeals for additional funding for the Burundi situation and for the emergency response in Europe had not been incorporated in the current budget, as presented in the conference room paper, and would be reported to the Standing Committee at its sixty-fifth meeting in March 2016. The Director of DER indicated that, despite strong support from donors, the funding gap was expected to reach US$ 3.9 billion by the end of 2015. This meant that the organization often had to prioritize life-saving interventions over other sectors and the Director of DER cited examples of the impact of underfunding in various operations.

30. Delegations reiterated concern about the funding gap and its impact on operations, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. The Office was encouraged to provide further examples of the impact of the funding gap on populations of concern and more detailed information on which operations and sectors were most affected. Regarding prioritization, UNHCR was also urged to ensure transparency surrounding the decision-making process at headquarters and in the field and what criteria were used. One delegation said that, besides donor fatigue and reduced budgets, diversion of humanitarian aid was a concern.

31. Responding to a question about possible mechanisms to support durable solutions in Africa, the Deputy High Commissioner spoke about the Solutions Alliance and the importance of partnership-oriented approaches. She also provided an update on the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, noting that the Inter-Agency Standing Committee was in favour of more ambitious recommendations and was working on a number of proposals in this regard.

32. The Controller highlighted the importance of unearmarked funding, which allowed UNHCR to react quickly and flexibly to meet evolving needs. She noted the high implementation rate (95 per cent on programme), which could not be achieved without unearmarked funding. In response to a question about how UNHCR managed its increased expenditures and ensured oversight, the Controller spoke about the importance of having an adequate number of qualified staff at headquarters and in the field to oversee and carry out functions related to oversight and financial management, working in synergy. In terms of prioritization and the reallocation of funds, she described the complex process, involving regular assessments of the greatest priorities facing the organization and a number of variables such as funds available, earmarking, financial commitments and currency fluctuations. The Director of DER added that while headquarters provided strategic advice and technical expertise, the final decisions regarding the allocation of resources within an operation were taken by the field. He also provided further examples of the impact of underfunding in the field.

33. The draft decision on budgets and funding for 2015 was adopted (see annex to the present document).

B. Biennial programme budget for 2016-2017 of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

34. The Controller presented the biennial programme budget for 2016-2017 (A/AC.96/1147) and commented on the Report of the ACABQ[4], which was an addendum to the budget document. She noted that many of the suggestions made by Member States in relation to the presentation of the previous biennial budget had been incorporated in the 2016-2017 budget document. She provided an overview of the main features of the budget, noting that it had been formulated on the basis of a global needs assessment.

35. UNHCR was commended for its efforts in managing a complex needs-based budgeting system in the current challenging context and for the positive assessment from the ACABQ. The Committee noted with concern that the proportion of unearmarked funding was decreasing, restricting the flexibility of the Office to prioritize. While it was acknowledged that unearmarked funding provided less domestic visibility and was becoming harder to sustain and defend, delegations called for unearmarked funding to ensure the flexibility necessary for an effective response, particularly in protracted situations. They urged UNHCR to continue documenting the advantages and impact of unearmarked funding and how the organization makes use of it. A number of delegations again expressed concern about the significant reductions in the budget for Africa, while significant increases in populations of concern were expected, which could call into question the integrity of the protection response in the region. There was also a question with regards to the allocation of funding for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and whether it was sufficient, given the record number of IDPs globally. While understanding that the budget document had to be prepared in time for the meeting with the ACABQ, one delegation queried why it was not up to date and not reflective of the needs that had already been defined over the course of 2015.

36. The Controller took note of the request for further information on the use of unearmarked funding and indicated that UNHCR would look into providing more regular updates. In terms of the overall net decrease in the budget for Africa, she explained that this was partially due to significant investments made in camp infrastructure in 2015, which did not require further budgeting, as well as expected returns. In terms of the timing of the budget document, the Controller explained the complex planning process, which begins in March, the various assessments made at headquarters and in the field, and the oversight involved, making it difficult to incorporate new needs after the beginning of the planning cycle.

37. Regarding issues raised in the ACABQ report, on fraud prevention she noted that UNHCR was committed to further strengthening its efforts in this area, both internally and in relation to its implementing partners. On implementing partner management more broadly, the Controller assured the Committee that UNHCR valued the recommendations of the OIOS made in 2013 and outlined a number of measures being taken by the Office to implement them and to improve partnerships beyond the scope of the recommendations. Regarding a question about staff-in-between-assignments (SIBAs), she noted that UNHCR was constantly working to ensure that, despite a very mobile workforce, the number of SIBAs was kept to an absolute minimal level. She also indicated that management worked actively to reassign such staff, but that, in the interim, the majority continued to contribute to the work of the Office through temporary assignments.

[4] The report had been provided to the Committee as an advance version and would be issued in due course as A/AC.96/1147/Add.1

V. Any other business

38. The Rapporteur of the Executive Committee provided an update on the discussions on the Executive Committee conclusions process undertaken since the June 2015 Standing Committee. He noted that there was general support among delegations for the adoption of a multi-year workplan and that there was agreement that this should be for an initial two-year period (2016 and 2017). Four themes had been shortlisted for consideration as part of the workplan. While the flexible and indicative nature of the multi-year work plan was widely acknowledged, discussions were still ongoing with respect to the number of topics that would be considered per year, as well as the order of priority of the four shortlisted themes. The Rapporteur hoped that delegations could resolve these issues in a spirit of cooperation and compromise prior to the meeting of the Executive Committee in October 2015.

39. Delegations thanked the Rapporteur for his efforts with respect to the conclusions process, and several delegations reiterated their support for the multi-year work plan. It was noted that there was still some work to be done in achieving consensus on the themes to be considered in light of divergences among Member States. One delegation requested that States be permitted to submit additional themes for consideration as part of the multi-year work plan, however another delegation noted that it would be important to define topics quickly in light of the many important issues that required the attention of the Executive Committee. Support was expressed for the adoption of more than one conclusion per year.

40. In response, the Rapporteur reiterated that the multi-year workplan would be flexible and indicative, and that discussions were still open with respect to the themes to be considered.

41. The Secretary of the Executive Committee briefed the Standing Committee on the preparations for the upcoming meeting of the Executive Committee, including the high-level segment. He announced that the President of Afghanistan would be attending the high-level segment and requested delegations to be represented at an appropriate level.

Annex

Decision on budgets and funding for 2015

The Standing Committee,

Recalling the Executive Committee's decision on administrative, financial and programme matters at its sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth sessions (A/AC.96/1132, para. 15 and A/AC.96/1143, para. 13, respectively), as well as its discussions under the programme budgets and funding item at the sixty-third meeting of the Standing Committee in June 2015,

Reaffirming the importance of international burden and responsibility-sharing in reducing the burden on countries hosting refugees, especially developing ones,

1. *Recalls* that the Executive Committee, at its sixty-fifth session, approved programmes and budgets for regional programmes, global programmes and headquarters under UNHCR's 2014-2015 biennial programme budget (revised) amounting to $6,234.4 million for 2015;

3. *Notes* that the 2015 supplementary budgets currently amount to $1,017.1 million for programmes benefiting refugees, stateless persons and internally displaced persons;

4. *Notes* the reduction of the 2015 annual budget of $158.4 million for the Middle East and North Africa region;

5. *Takes note* of the increase in UNHCR's 2015 annual budget to a current total of $7,093.1 million;

6. *Recognizes* that emergencies and unforeseen activities unfolding in 2015 may result in the need for additional or expanded supplementary budgets, and that additional resources, over and above those for existing budgets, would be needed to meet such needs; and

7. *Urges* Member States to continue to respond generously, in a spirit of solidarity and in a timely manner, to the High Commissioner's appeal for resources to meet in full the 2015 annual budget.